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ARE OUR TEACHERS AFRAID TO TEACH?¹

By ROBERT M. HUTCHINS

The Ford Foundation

Education is impossible in many parts of the United States today because free inquiry and free discussion are impossible. In these communities, the teacher of economics, history, or political science cannot teach. Even the teacher of literature must be careful. Didn't a member of Indiana's Textbook Commission call Robin Hood subversive?

The National Education Association studied no less than 522 school systems, covering every section of the United States, and came to the conclusion that American teachers today are reluctant to consider "controversial issues." But what does that mean? An issue is a point on which the parties take different positions. A noncontroversial issue, therefore, is as impossible as a round square. All issues are controversial; if they were not, they would not be issues.

In Los Angeles, Houston, and Pawtucket, a teacher would hesitate to mention UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, because school authorities have made it plain that they are afraid of it. Since those who oppose UNESCO generally oppose the United Nations, the teacher should probably not refer to the U.N. either. Since those who oppose the U.N. believe that the United States should somehow isolate itself from world affairs, the teacher would be unwise to say very much about international relations. How, then, can teachers say anything worth saying about the world in which we live?

The fact that President Eisenhower has endorsed UNESCO will not protect the teacher who follows his example. What teacher would dare to say what Secretary of State Dulles has said about

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the ultimate admission of Red China to the society of nations? A teacher might risk his job by saying what Harold Stassen, Foreign Operations director, has said about the eventual necessity of some kind of world law and world government. It is even dangerous for him to say what everybody was saying ten years ago, that we must all do all we can to promote world understanding. Vocal pressure groups throughout the land now take the view that any kind of interest in organizing the world for peace is unpatriotic.

The other day, a teacher in one of the elementary schools of Los Angeles had to take a day off and left word with his substitute to discuss the Bill of Rights with the children. This was a natural suggestion, for it was Bill of Rights Week. But the substitute teacher, instead of talking about American liberty, read the story of Aladdin and his wonderful lamp. Why? Because American liberty was a dangerous subject in Los Angeles, where the school board was conducting an investigation into the loyalty of its teachers. Similar investigations have been launched in New York, Philadelphia and San Francisco. Anything a teacher says about freedom, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, or the Declaration of Independence may be misinterpreted.

Even Nixon's Views Aren't Safe

In many places, it is unwise for a teacher to agree with Vice-President Nixon about racial discrimination, or with Chief Justice Earl Warren about health insurance. It would be folly for him to concur with the late Sen. Robert Taft on whether members of the Communist party should be permitted to teach in universities: Taft, let us remember, said that he had no objection to their doing so if they did not seek to indoctrinate their students with their political views.

Sen. William E. Jenner (Rep., Ind.) says that twenty or more colleges and universities in California are cooperating with state and Congressional investigating groups in a black-listing program under which about 100 members of their faculties have been removed and at least as many more rejected for teaching posts. According to the former chief counsel of the California State Committee on Un-American Activities, some institutions hired full-

time investigators, many of them former members of the FBI or the military intelligence, to creep around the classrooms and the campus.

A teacher is peculiarly vulnerable, on or off the campus. An inattentive or malicious listener will pass on his faulty or distorted recollection of what the teacher said, and it will finally reach his superiors, usually through some pressure group, with the holes and embroidery that characterize hearsay. The charge may be absurd or anonymous or both, but this will not reduce the effect; for it is now almost as bad to be "controversial" as it is to be a spy or a traitor.

A person becomes controversial when a question is raised about him. If you want to get rid of a teacher, make loud charges against him—then demand that he be fired because the charges have been made. All that anybody will remember about him when he tries to get another job is that he was in some kind of trouble about being a Red. Recently, in Houston, the member of the school board who cast the deciding vote against the continuance of the deputy superintendent said that he was doing so in the interest of peace and quiet. Citizens had objected to the deputy superintendent on the ground that he had been an officer of the American Veterans Committee.

Rarely does a teacher have the sweet, though expensive and tedious, solace of a libel suit. A teacher in California was so fortunate as to be accused by a broadcaster of being a "reported Communist." The main evidence was that she was a member of United World Federalists. She sued and recovered \$55,000. This remedy is seldom available against public officials acting in their official capacity.

We are already short 72,000 teachers; yet 60,000 of those we have leave the profession every year. One reason, of course, is that they are not paid a living wage. Their average salary is \$3400. The average is that high only because of states like New York and California. In Arkansas, more than half the teachers get less than \$1900 a year. To the burden of economics we are adding the ordeal of inquisition.

The teachers of many subjects cannot teach without risking their jobs. Teachers are becoming second-class citizens. In

many states, they are required to take special oaths that they have not been disloyal. Why not ask them to sign oaths that they have not been robbers or prostitutes? In many states, they are not permitted to belong to organizations that other citizens may legally join. In California, they do not think it wise to attend meetings that other citizens may freely attend. And, of course, their belonging to any organization or attending any meeting or being seen with any person or reading any book or subscribing to any magazine is subject to the same kind of reckless misinterpretation as anything they say in the classroom.

Whittaker Chambers and Professor Sidney Hook of New York University, both of whom proclaim themselves devotees of academic freedom, say, "Don't worry; only a few teachers have been fired." What has this got to do with it? The question is not how many teachers have been fired, but how many think they might be, and for what reasons. It is even worse than that: Teachers are not merely afraid of being fired; they are afraid of getting into trouble, with resultant damage to their professional prospects and their standing in their communities. You don't have to fire many teachers to intimidate them all. The entire teaching profession of the United States is now intimidated.

Chambers and Hook say individuals still speak out. What if they do? Their number is getting smaller every day, and it is a sad commentary that we have to congratulate ourselves that a few still speak when millions should feel free to do so. The spirit of the teaching profession is being crushed, and, with it, our hopes of education.

Teaching Ability Doesn't Count

Competence or professional skill will not protect the teacher. In the investigations that have gone on around the country, I do not recall one in which it was charged that the teacher was not a good teacher. I do not remember more than one or two in which it was suggested that the teacher attempted to get his pupils to adopt his alleged political views or even that they knew what those views were.

When a school board conducts an investigation, it will fire a teacher for insubordination if he refuses to answer a question.

The constitutional protection open to the American citizen in criminal trials or Congressional investigations will not save a teacher's job. In most colleges and universities in the country, a professor who refuses to answer the questions of any governmental authority will be compelled to resign.

Harvard is an exception. And look what has happened to Harvard. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy has warned mothers and fathers against our oldest university, calling it a sanctuary for Communists and a "smelly mess." The Senator's objection to Harvard is that it has refused to discharge a professor who stood on his rights under the Constitution that the Senator is sworn to defend.

Harvard is the richest university in the world; it has a strong tradition, sanctified by time. Yet even an ancient and wealthy seat of learning can hardly welcome the repeated public attacks of a senator of the United States. These are times when nobody wants to be criticized by anybody for anything, and Harvard is not immune to the spirit of the times. The professors at Harvard have now been notified that the inquisitor's eye is upon them. They are human. They will watch their step. They will speak less freely. They will write on guard. They may decide that, on many issues, the safest course is not to speak or write at all.

The attack on Harvard will not be lost on other, weaker institutions. If this can happen to Harvard, think what can happen to them. And so professors everywhere will hesitate before they express opinions contrary to those of Senator McCarthy, or before they say anything that can be twisted—somehow, sometime, by someone—into an unpopular statement.

The full, frank, free discussion upon which education depends must therefore disappear. The free market in ideas may well be strangled by fear. I have seen the effects of legislative investigations on a university I had the duty of administering. They were paralyzing. The faculty came to feel that saying anything to which the more benighted members of the Illinois Legislature might take exception could embarrass the institution. Yet the legislative investigations turned up nothing discreditable to the university.

The same may be said of last year's Congressional investigation

into the philanthropic foundations. A renewal of that investigation is now pending. On the basis of an association with these organizations, on the receiving or the giving end, that covers thirty years, I can testify that the trouble with the foundations has not been their radical ideas but their fear of any ideas. Their most well-defined characteristic has been timidity. Imagine, then, what the current allegations that they are subversive have done. Now, after McCarthy's attack on Harvard, they will hesitate to give money to the university.

The view is growing that we must avoid "controversial issues" in the classroom. But issues cannot be omitted from education, except through falsity, distortion, or concealment. If an issue is presented as though it were not one—that is, as though there were only one side to it—this is not education; it is indoctrination. This is precisely what the Russians do. And those who pass through a similar process in the United States are being trained to become passive subjects of a police state. They cannot think and act as independent citizens in a democracy: they will not know what are the issues with which, as citizens, they must cope; they will not know how to go about facing those issues.

Depending on the political atmosphere at any given time, some issues are hotter than others. Today, the issues about which people feel most strongly lie in the realm of international affairs or concern the political and economic life of the country.

The realm of the political is peculiarly the realm of opinion, and hence of proper controversy. It is absurd to suggest that, on these issues, teachers should present only "facts"; the selection of the facts to be presented always involves a judgment. And though the facts may be accepted, the conclusions to be drawn from them may be far apart.

It is equally absurd to insist that teachers hide their opinions or their professional judgments from their pupils. Anybody who has ever taught knows that this can't be done. To omit one opinion is to offer tacit support to its opponents. A teacher is supposed to teach, not echo. A teacher is an intelligence, not a phonograph. The greatest absurdity of all would be to forbid the very consideration of issues in the educational system; for that would mean that the rising generation of Americans would be

both unequipped and unprepared to meet the life-and-death problems that confront it.

What can we ask of our teachers? We can demand the fairest possible presentation of a problem—of all sides of a problem. We must demand for our children the freest exploration of ideas. That is not what vocal pressure groups are yammering about. They want only *their* side presented, and anybody who suggests that there is another side is likely to lose his livelihood and his reputation.

Those who oppose free inquiry can be neither Americans nor free. They do not believe in democracy. They do not understand our Constitution. They have no faith in the democratic process.

If we really want education in this country, we will have to pay teachers decent salaries, give them the status that their importance to society justifies, and insure them the freedom that their work and their calling demand.

No country ever needed education more than ours does today.